



Avid Acutus Turntable

by Jimmy Hughes

Some subjects are so personal, so controversial, they're almost beyond discussion. Religion, Sex, Politics, Money, to name only four. Oh, and Turntables. Who'd have thought the mechanics of spinning a chunk of black plastic at 33 1/3 rpm could create such passion and debate? But it does, it does! Here's one branch of engineering and design where there seem to be more ways of skinning a cat than there are cats to skin; each of them different, each of them valid.

The Avid Acutus is no exception. Designer Conrad Mas' uncompromising approach has produced a turntable that's essentially neutral, accurate, and truthful. Whether or not one likes it is almost beside the point – the aim was not to make pleasant sounds. However, subjective views aside, no one could fail to admire and respect the thought and attention to detail that's gone into every aspect of the design. Conrad started from scratch to produce his own, unique solution. His goal? The Truth; nothing more, nothing less.

It's important to understand this. The Acutus has not been tweaked to sound pleasing, involving, or entertaining – though that isn't to say it can't be any of these things. Primarily, it was designed to reproduce what's on your records; for better for worse, for richer for poorer, for as long as ye both shall live. Amen.

This approach is more unusual than you might think. Although all equipment designers strive for accuracy, most bend the rules a bit to achieve a certain kind of sound – their idea of what constitutes the truth. Alas, in the world of hi-fi, accuracy is elusive. It's easy to define; nothing added, nothing taken away – that's



where the phrase High Fidelity came from. But how do you measure what's gained and lost? Where's the reference point? Speaking personally, I'm uneasy with 'accuracy' as a measure of absolute sound quality; I prefer the term authenticity. The question is – what do you want? An accurate sound that's absolutely truthful even if, sometimes, it isn't very nice? Or something that sounds authentic and believable, even if not (in the strictest sense) absolutely accurate?

The polished chrome Acutus came with an SME 5 tonearm into which I

fitted a Transfiguration Spirit 2 cartridge. Phono stage was my regular Audiolab 8000PPA. First impressions were of a tight, sharp, lucid, and precisely focussed sound without an ounce of spare flesh anywhere. Detail was staggering, and if performance were judged solely on how much could be heard the score would have to be ten out of ten.

Sorry, make that 12 out of 10.

Yet something was missing. Overall, the musical presentation seemed slightly stiff and constrained. Clarity and control were beyond reproach, but for my taste the music lacked grace and charm.

The head was impressed, but the heart remained unmoved. Toes weren't tapping . . .

Stereo soundstaging was unerringly precise; lateral placement of voices and instruments couldn't be faulted for solidity and stability. Yet images were perhaps a shade less holographic in terms of depth and three-dimensional projection than is possible. Everything was there, but the music never quite blossomed or burgeoned into life. Somehow, the total seemed less than the sum of the parts . . .

A couple of days passed with feelings still mixed, so I switched phono stages to the Michell Delphini. Immediately, a different side of the Acutus emerged; the exceptional clarity and detail was still present, but now the music sounded more fluid and subtly-shaded.



► The presentation was still precise and tightly focussed, but voices and instruments had more space around them and the music felt more relaxed and natural. Timing was better too, with rhythms more solidly portrayed.

I knew from past experience that the Audiolab phono stage could sound – well, a bit Audiolab-ish; clean, precise, tonally neutral, but slightly cool and emotionally reserved. The 8000PPA is a very revealing component, and that's good from a reviewing standpoint. But, in tandem with the Acutus, things went to extremes. Rather than blame The Audiolab or the Avid, I think it's best to say the two simply don't gel as a combination – they're too similar to compliment one-another.

With the Delphini, the Acutus started making music, impressing time and again with its amazing analysis, its vividness and lucidity. At times, it was almost like x-raying the music, such as the clarity. It lays bare things like miking technique and depth-layering of voices and instruments. The Acutus is a very revealing turntable. And also, perhaps inevitably, sometimes an unforgiving one. Because the sound is so pared away, there's none of the comforting richness and warmth you find with other turntables. The Acutus shines a bright clear light on whatever LP you choose to play, and results aren't always predictable.

Some records I played sounded far better than expected, yet others disappointed – you'd hear all the seams and joins. At worst, the Acutus can be a little too revealing, highlighting what's wrong with a recording rather than what's right with it. However, at

best, the presentation was impressively lucid and very sharply focused. Buy an Acutus and you've a whole new record collection to listen to – guaranteed. You'll discover new things on discs you thought you knew backwards. The ride itself may not always be a comfortable one – you can love it one minute, hate it the next – but it's never boring!

You'd expect a turntable with a massive 10kg platter, high-torque motor, and rigid platter/LP interface, to produce clean tight bass. And true to form the Acutus' bottom-end is resolutely solid. Indeed, the low-frequencies had the kind of firmness and control one associates with CD. Very impressive! Nevertheless, I sometimes missed the mixture of warmth, weight and breadth that characterises good analogue bass. In my view, good LP bass is often more natural and realistic (authentic), than tight clean (accurate?) CD bass.

Acoustic double bass, for example, should sound fat and round rather than lean and mean; one needs to sense the size of the instrument and its woody resonant

warmth. Naturally, judgements about bass quality – tightness, control, depth – are very personal, and also quite system-dependant. But on a direct A/B comparison I'll wager the Acutus is likely to sound leaner and firmer than most of its peers. It's down to close-tolerance engineering and firmly clamping the record to a solid platter.

Typically, Avid have gone to extremes here, using a bonded polymer surface for the turntable 'mat', while raising the brass centre of the main bearing so it sits slightly proud of the platter and makes hard contact with the LP itself. The clamp firmly presses

the centre of the record to the main bearing, then bears down on the circumference of the record label and literally flattens the disc onto the platter. This clamping arrangement gives the Acutus much of its sonic signature, imparting superb



The Acutus employs a powerful French Crouzet AC synchronous 24 pole motor, completely rebuilt by Avid, that produces a massive 130mN of torque – over ten times more powerful than many similar turntable motors. You can gauge its power when the deck is switched on; the massive 10kg platter is up to speed almost immediately. Engineering tolerances are so close, there's no need for fine speed adjustment – the Acutus is spot-on.

The platter runs on an inverted tapered through-hardened stainless-steel bearing shaft that's topped by a tungsten carbide ball. This runs in a sapphire cup jewel set in a brass housing. The designer claims this arrangement ensures exceptional concentricity and ultra-low bearing noise. Sintered bronze bushes, with a clearance of just 3/10ths of a thou, ensure long-term lubrication – a problem with all inverted bearing turntables.

The massive 50mm thick platter is machined from a solid aluminum billet, dynamically balanced, and fitted with a polymer resin mat that's slightly softer than the vinyl used for LP records. This polymer is actually clear, but being bonded to a black anodized disc gives it dark grey appearance. The sub-chassis is a substantial alloy casting, with deep V grooves for extra rigidity, and the three spring turrets that support it are generously proportioned. One excellent aspect of the suspension is the complete lack of speed variation when the whole thing oscillates up and down.

Setting up is simple and straightforward. And once you've set it up, that's it – no further tweaking is necessary! Alignment shouldn't drift; therefore performance will be consistent over extended usage. Many high-end turntables are temperamental, but not this one.

► firmness and solidity to the music. On the right material, results are deeply impressive, no question. One of the great strengths of this turntable is its clean accurate soundstaging. Instruments and voices are placed with pin-point precision. Alas, there's a downside. At worst, this precision takes over, making the music sound constrained – as though voices and instruments were held in a vice-like grip, unable to breathe. Some listeners like this kind of super-clean, super-tight musical presentation, and who am I to argue? But to me it's missing the deceptively easy warmth and smooth flowing naturalness of good live acoustic sound.

The clamp is an integral part of the Acutus' design. And while it's not written on tablets of stone that you have to use it, the raised bit near the centre spindle prevents LPs from lying flat on the platter unless clamped. However, it's possible to circumvent the clamp by using a QR Development's Ringmat. Subjectively, I felt this worked very well with the Acutus, and, were I lucky enough to own this amazing turntable, that's how I'd use it – with



a Shun Mook record weight replacing the clamp. To my ears (and with my system) this combination created the best compromise between naturalness and ease on the one hand, and focus and precision on the other. Which is right? Who knows! But with this deck you can have it both ways. Used as

supplied, the Acutus has the tightest most focussed sound imaginable. If it's too controlled for your taste (or for some recordings), it's comparatively easy to introduce a little extra 'give' without excessively compromising clarity and solidity. 'Nuff said!



Two minor niggles with the clamp: it struggles to flatten thick, 180g discs unless you really torque it down, and it can scuff record labels (I ended up using a thin paper disc to protect them).

Build quality is stunning, and the deck is beautifully finished. It looks and feels expensive without being vulgar, yet there are no unwarranted excesses. Everything's there for a reason: if you talk to the designer he can justify even the tiniest detail.

The sprung suspension ensures excellent isolation, and the clever balanced spring arrangement virtually eliminates yaw. Having the three O rings around the turntable circumference helps damp-out horizontal movement, reducing speed fluctuations. This helps create rock-like speed stability. Of course, having a massive 10kg platter helps, as does an incredibly powerful motor and state-of-the-art power supply. Listening to the Acutus imparts feelings of certainty; precise, solid, unflappable, it sounds as though nothing short of an earthquake could upset its equilibrium.

When it comes to subjective judgements about sound quality and musical presentation, chances are

the Acutus will polarise opinions. You'll either think it's the most incredible turntable you've ever heard, or you'll find it cold, analytical, and distinctly uninvolved. It's even possible, depending on mood and recording, you'll fluctuate between these two extremes – I know I did.

Yet at the same time, there's something addictive about its exceptional clarity and lucidity – it's definitely a turntable that grows on you.

Classic analogue – warm, friendly, 'romantic' – it isn't.

But, Conrad Mas wasn't after soothing noises. Whose to say his uncompromising approach hasn't got closer to the truth than any previous turntable? I liked it more and more as time went on, and had I five grand to spare, I'd definitely go for one. Alas, I haven't – but I understand there's a scaled-down version available for about £1400. Now that could be very interesting . . .



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Speeds:	33 and 45
User Adjustable	No
Lid:	No, soft cover supplied
Arm Compatibility:	9" only. Gimbal bearings preferred
Dimensions: (WxHxD):	450 x 215 x 390mm
Weight:	21.3 Kg
Finishes:	Polished Chrome or Gold Hardware
Price - motor unit:	██████████ respectively

Manufacturer:

AVID, UNIT 52, 137 NORTH GATE,
ALCONBURY AIRFIELD, HUNTINGDON,
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